

The History Guide

Lectures on Modern European Intellectual History

Lecture 22

The Utopian Socialists: Robert Owen and Saint-Simon (2)

When we turn from Fourier (see [Lecture 21](#)) to the ideas and work of Robert Owen (1771-1858), we move into a significantly different historical context. Although Owen was engaged in the textile industry, he was not repelled by his work, nor did he live out his life in abstract drug-induced pondering. Instead, Owen became a highly successful cotton manufacturer and entrepreneur who managed to climb the social ladder into the ranks of the wealthy and socially respectable. Owen understood the implications of industrialization better than Fourier and accepted them in a much more positive way. He was more open to new machinery, new techniques and new discipline because he saw these improvements as steps on the road to increasing human happiness.

In his earliest days, however, [ROBERT OWEN](#) appeared to be little more than a benevolent factory owner who made paternalistic improvements in the lives of his employees. He spoke a language that seemed to hark back to a pre-industrial moral economy and a near rejection of modern commercial civilization. For this reason, Owen attracted the attention of the rural gentry and those politicians whose ideas were anti-modern.



Owen's reputation grew after 1800 through his operation of a textile factory in New Lanark, Scotland. Owen had introduced such improvements as shorter working hours, healthier and safer working conditions, after-hours recreation, schools for children and adults, moral education, renovated housing, an end to child labor and insurance plans financed by payroll deduction. What was remarkable about New Lanark was that Owen not only improved the lot of his employees, he also managed to make profits.

Before long, New Lanark became a tourist attraction where visitors came to gawk at Owen's social experiment in efficient production.

Owen argued that human nature could be changed: since we are all products of our environment, one need only change the environment to change man.

Owen hated the modern factory system, so he decided to revolutionize it. The factory system encouraged social irresponsibility, destructive competition and heartless individualism. In contrast, pre-industrial society was characterized by a pervasive social conscience, by a belief by the upper orders that they had the

duty to look after the poor and unfortunate, and by a strong sense of community among the working classes. In his earliest work, [A NEW VIEW OF SOCIETY](#) (1813), Owen recommended "a plain, simple, practical plan which would not contain the least danger to any individual, or to any part of society," and which had the goal of making the poor independent and self-supporting. Although Owen had won the support of the anti-modernizers, it soon became apparent that his ideas and practices had more in common with the democratic-radical tradition than with the maintenance of the status-quo. In typical 18th century fashion, Owen rejected Christianity and custom and looked to the unique guidance of Reason and Nature. Owen argued that human nature could be changed: since we are all products of our environment, one need only change the environment to change man. This environmentalism of Owen's became a cornerstone of all socialist theories and programs of the 19th century.

This much said, Owen also went on to reject the democratic-radical emphasis on competitive individual effort because his personal experience convinced him that it had unfortunate consequences. Owen was no friend of [Thomas Paine](#). Owen argued that the greatest happiness of the greatest number should be the test of any system but, unlike [Adam Smith](#) and [Jeremy Bentham](#), he did not believe that the best way to assure human happiness was through the increased productivity of a free market system. Cooperation and harmonious planning would be far superior and far more productive in the interests of society.

Owen's first plans for the establishment of a utopian community resembled the phalanx of Fourier but without the dynamics of the Theory of Passional Attractions. Owen called these settlements, Villages of Cooperation. These villages were self-contained agricultural communities where the unemployed could find productive employment. Owen was confident that his Villages would spread rapidly because first, they were based on cooperative labor and second, they could produce more than private enterprise. However, the Villages did not take Britain by storm. He could not obtain enough capital from the government nor could he find much help from the private sector. Even working class leaders were suspicious of Owen, after all, he was himself a factory master. Between 1805 and 1815, 15,000 visitors came to New Lanark. The Villages continued to show profits but the idea did not spread. One reason why New Lanark did not work was due to its location. New Lanark was dependent on water power rather than steam and was filled with workers who had to be literally imported into the area. It was a question of timing, I think. New Lanark was operating under conditions that were typical of the initial stages of textile production, conditions which were being rapidly overcome by the rapidly advancing Industrial Revolution (see [Lecture 17](#)).

New Lanark was not, properly speaking, a socialist experiment. Owen and his partners owned it and he directed it personally with very little democratic input or participation from the workers. Private ownership and the profit motive remained in spite of the more humanistic measures that Owen certainly adopted. Thus the failure of the New Lanark model to spread was not really a failure of a socialist model as it was the failure of Owen's own paternalistic humanitarianism. It must also be mentioned that the type of worker brought to New Lanark was of a rather homogenous type: Scottish workers of Calvinist backgrounds who were inclined to discipline, uncomplaining labor and self-improvement.

In the early 1820s, and thoroughly frustrated with the blindness of the English, Owen resolved to establish a community in America. So, in 1824, he sailed for the United States where he was received in Washington with much fanfare. Then he proceeded to New Harmony, Indiana where he had purchased a large plot of land. New Harmony was the first and most famous of some sixteen Owenite communities that appeared in the US between 1825 and 1829. None, however, lasted more than a few years as full-fledged socialist communities. New Harmony collapsed when one of Owen's American business partners ran off with all profits. Another problem at New Harmony was motivational. Many workers came to New Harmony as serious adherents of Owenism. Others, however, came to dance and sing and play. Owen found that he was no longer dealing with rather hardworking and complacent Scottish workers. The Americans among the Owenites, coming from a democratic tradition, began to have reservations about submitting to Owen's authority, whether paternalist or not. Owen did not spend much time at New Harmony and the advice he offered once he had arrived was ignored. When confronted with dissension he urged the colonists to think about what they were doing -- in so doing they would discover the error of their ways and become rational. In the end, however, the eternal principles which Owen claimed to have discovered were not enough to keep New Harmony intact. In 1828, Owen gave up his American adventure and returned to England where he ended up organizing the working classes until his death thirty years later.

By any careful definition, [Claude Henri de Saint-Simon](#) (1760-1825), cannot be termed a socialist. The term socialist is associated with his name because his followers, known collectively as the Saint-Simonians, became socialists at a later stage. The details of Saint-Simon's life -- and even more so the lives of the Saint-Simonians -- are colorful and frequently bizarre, a tendency we have already noticed with Fourier. Saint-Simon was of ancient noble lineage. One of his ancestors was the famous [Duc de Saint-Simon](#) who recorded the daily affairs of court life under Louis XIV. During his career, Saint-Simon fought alongside Lafayette and the American revolutionaries, and, returning to France, narrowly missed the guillotine. During the Directory he rose to wealth and prominence, only to lose his fortune, suffer a breakdown and pass some time in an insane asylum. After his death Saint-Simonian religious cults grew up, proclaiming the advent of a new age -- the New Christianity -- while others preached orgiastic sexual liberation. By the time of the Second French Empire (1850s and 60s), bankers, industrialists and prominent government officials professed admiration for the ideas of Saint-Simon and the Saint-Simonians.

"The more society us perfected morally and physically, the more its intellectual and manual efforts are subdivided; thus, in the ordinary course of life, the attention of men is fixed more and more upon objects of special interest, corresponding to the extent that the fine arts, science and industry progress."

The New Christianity (1825)

Compared to the experience of either Fourier or Owen, Saint-Simon's position in society never really put him in touch with the realities of industrialism. His experience under the Directory is worth noting in this respect: as a friend and associate of the financiers and speculators who flourished during the Thermidorean Reaction, he was just the kind of person who was detested by men like Fourier or Babeuf. Where Fourier and

Babeuf saw corruption and an almost immoral lack of concern for the common person, Saint-Simon saw expertise and

enterprise. Where they had looked to capitalist growth with a suspicious eye, Saint-Simon welcomed it. Where they detested England and its social system, he was an ardent anglophile. And where they were repelled by the falseness and unnaturalness of Parisian society, Saint-Simon enjoyed the company of brilliant artists, scientists and men of affairs whom he encountered at the fashionable salons.

For some time, Saint-Simon appeared to be a typical liberal aristocrat, a man who spoke a language favorable to the emerging liberal and progressive bourgeoisie. Yet Saint-Simon was something consistently more than a liberal, more than a simple-minded defender of *laissez-faire* capitalism. As his thought became more refined he became more and more concerned with the dangers inherent in uncontrolled individualism. More than either Owen or Fourier, Saint-Simon perceived the ramifications of the new industrialism of his own time and he attempted to place his perceptions into a broad theoretical framework. He idealized productivity, organization, efficiency, innovation and technological discovery, however, this does not mean that these ends could be achieved in a free market economy.

Saint-Simon condemned kings, nobles and the clergy as useless and parasitical. That was a familiar enough theme for the period. He believed that in a previous stage of historical development, kings, nobles and priests served a necessary role. It was only now, under new conditions, that they had become socially useless. The aristocracy was now an anachronism, and served as an obstacle to the new social order which Saint-Simon saw emerging around him. Even these obstacles, Saint-Simon thought, were to be expected. Had not all recorded history been little more than the record of conflict between one group coming into power and an older group who could no longer maintain its power?

While Saint-Simon incorporates the working classes into his vision of the future, the workers do not play a dominant or even important position. While manual labor would be honored and the parasitical orders banned, what would distinguish the new system was not so much labor but labor's reorganization and the application of technology to it. Thus, the highest positions of prestige and authority would be assumed by a meritocratic elite of intelligence and creativity: the technocracy. Saint-Simon was undeniably elitist. He saw no reason to conclude that manual laborers could, on their own, organize and run an efficient and rational new order. They had the need of the authority and direction of an elite cadre of technocrats.

Saint-Simon's ideas lent themselves to various re-interpretations. By 1830, five years after his death, his followers split into several factions. Those heading in a socialist direction built upon his rejection of individualist selfishness and rationalism and his concern for social solidarity and interdependent responsibility. They popularized Saint-Simon's ideas and tried to make them more attractive to the working classes. In seeking greater support, the socialists among the Saint-Simonians also began to question the institution of private property, especially from the standpoint of inheritance laws whereby the children of rich parents obtained wealth without personal merit or service to society. Saint-Simon defended private property as the reward for achievement but he did not view it as a sacred or natural right: private property was little more than an institution useful in the organization of industrial productivity. The Saint-Simonians put this attack on the rights of inheritance into the context of a liberation of the most numerous class, and as part of a program to enhance productivity. The end of inheritance was not a step toward communist egalitarianism.

In the last analysis, a key contribution of Saint-Simon and the Saint-Simonians was to link socialism solidly with the notion of progress through industrialization. This had the effect of breaking away from the backward-looking tendencies of Babeuf's communism and the tendency to conceive of socialism as best achieved in isolated agricultural communities. This, and the identification of socialism with the working class, would be a central theme of the 1830s and 40s, moving Utopian Socialism away from its initial escapist tendencies toward an integration into historically rooted movements and concrete social and economic realities. In other words, the ideas of the Utopian Socialists began to percolate down to the working classes themselves, and especially their socialist representatives among them.

There is indeed little information about Saint-Simon that you will find on the Internet. However, you will find his [Letters from an Inhabitant of Geneva to His Contemporaries](#) (1803) and selections from [The New Christianity](#) (1825).

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